outside of their profession or their business. But the point is the restraint of serious thought within a groove. The remainder of life is treated superficially, with the imperfect categories of thought derived from one profession. 40

The various patterns of intellectual community that have constituted effective audiences for American intellectuals deserve finer analysis than can be offered here. But even this necessarily schematic analysis of the city and the professions as alternative communities of discourse expands our understanding of the historical configurations of American intellectual life. And it suggests a fruitful approach for a history of the life of the mind in America.

When Merle Curti first presented his “social history of American thought” to the profession in 1943, his goal of linking social and intellectual history was not assumed to be at all problematical. 41 In recent years, however, social and intellectual history have been increasingly uncomfortable in each other’s company. In looking for terms of rapprochement with social history, intellectual historians have been unduly attentive to the quantitative emphasis of much American and French social history. 42 A more fruitful approach to a social history of ideas is to focus on the way in which the social organization of knowledge affects the style, content, and social significance of intellectual activity.

By directing our attention to the social framework of intellectual life, the activity of the mind can be firmly located in time and place. 43 Writing intellectual history from a local standpoint becomes an exciting possibility. Here the full institutional matrix of intellectual life can be studied in sufficient detail to grasp the way in which specific ideas or ways of thinking develop, gain hegemony or lose significance, and are used in particular settings. We would learn much from studies of the changing social framework of knowledge in a particular locality over two or three centuries. How do various structures of discourse succeed each other over time and interact with each other? How are these changes related to the larger systems of ideas, social structures, and economies that find concrete articulation in a given locality?

These questions point toward a social history of ideas that can analyze the structures within which ideas are formulated, appropriated for use, and achieve hegemony in a given society. These issues are central to understanding the life of the mind because it is within these structures that reality is defined, and changes in the perception of reality are associated with changes in these structures over time. My emphasis here on the social foundations of intellectual life is not intended to deny that

the life of the mind is enmeshed in a world of ideas. The structure of ideas must be studied closely by historians, but this work must be matched by study of the structures within which ideas are developed, modified, and transmitted. Such a study will advance our understanding of how the various structures of discourse available to Americans for organizing intellectual life have enhanced (or hampered) their ability to penetrate “the nature of things.” 44
anonymity that characterized the chaotic mid-nineteenth-century city eroded these customary sources of intellectual authority. Neither personal knowledge nor clear social categories were available to organize and discipline intellectual life. Intellectual distinctions were blurred, and the identity of audiences became rather diffuse.

Urban intellectuals in the midnineteenth century confronted the difficult task of winning acceptance of their special competence in a milieu of strangers. With traditional rituals of accreditation abandoned, producers and consumers of intellectual work found it increasingly difficult to fix on the cues that made coherent intellectual discourse possible. Lacking a solid impersonal basis for establishing a relationship with their audience, urban intellectuals relied on their personalities and the appearance of intimate disclosure to establish the trust and authority essential for intellectual community. But personality was a poor substitute for the shared intellectual framework and clear social categories that had earlier given shape to local intellectual life. In such a situation, the eighteenth-century penchant for argument gave way to the quest for “influence.”

Henry Ward Beecher exemplified this pattern of intellectual life and revealed its weakness. The structure of discourse within which he operated as one of New York City’s most notable intellectuals did not demand—or allow—hard thinking and vigorous argument. Self-display, sentimentalism, posture, gesture, and preoccupation with external appearance characterized his thought and preaching style. In an important sense he was for theology what Barnum was for art and natural science. And the new professionalism—whether manifested in academic theology or in the Metropolitan Museum of Art—represented an attempt to reform this disorderly pattern of intellectual life.

Those who sought a more penetrating and rigorous intellectual life rejected and withdrew from the general culture of the city in order to embrace a new model of professionalism. Intellectual purposes were thus clarified and made less complicated. Edwards A. Park, in a lecture in Boston to the Massachusetts Congregational Clergy, urged his colleagues to “conduct our scholastic disputes in a scholastic way” for “we do wrong to our own minds when we carry our scientific difficulties down to the arena of popular dissension.” Rather conventional formulas were sufficient to fulfill their pastoral duties. Park proposed, in effect, to separate the serious technical role of professionals from their responsibility of supplying usable philosophies for the general public. In time, as Bruce Kuklick has demonstrated in the case of Harvard phi-

losophy, even this compromise was eroded by the complete triumph of the technical over the public role of philosophy.

Intellectual life was tightened as people of ideas were inducted, increasingly through the emerging university system, into the restricted worlds of specialized discourse. The quest of professionals for the authority to define valid knowledge within disciplines is often interpreted as an expression of class interest, and to a degree it was. But the new professionals were seeking intellectual security as much as social privilege and power. The new disciplines offered relatively precise subject matter and procedures at a time when both were greatly confused. The new professionalism also promised social guarantees of competence—certification—in an era when criteria of intellectual authority were vague and professional performance was unreliable.

Urban and professional cultures were also connected with alternative ways of defining and attempting to solve problems. The authority of disciplinary professionalism was linked to new perceptions of the nature of “reality.” Representatives of urban culture—from Daniel Drake to P. T. Barnum—had assumed that reality was generally accessible to common observation. However democratic, this naive empiricism was gradually rejected as inadequate. The new professions were associated with a growing sense that understanding must penetrate internal qualities, processes, and structures. Serious intellectual problems and procedures were largely reformulated, most notably in respect to scientific work and in the analysis of society (social science). Valid knowledge, formerly concretized in individual relationships to nature and society, now seemed to be defined in forms and processes one step removed from direct human experience.

Certainly we must welcome the new power and rigor that the disciplinary professions brought to a disorganized nineteenth-century intellectual life. Yet the twentieth-century hegemony of the new professionalism remains problematical. As Edmund Wilson pointed out in The Wound and the Bow, powerful new weapons are often inseparable from serious disability. Rigor and intellectual security were gained at the cost of making the parts of American intellectual life more powerful than the whole. Was an intellectual community that comprehended the whole of life compatible with the new professions? When the character of modern professionalism’s relation to the social whole was becoming apparent, Alfred North Whitehead pointedly observed: “Each profession makes progress, but it is progress in its own groove. But there is no groove . . . adequate for the comprehension of human life. . . . Of course, no one is merely a mathematician, or merely a lawyer. People have lives
organized urban culture characteristic of the third quarter of the nineteenth century, and it pointed in new directions. If urban culture had been centripetal, encouraging the convergence of specialisms, this new professionalism was centrifugal. Charles W. Eliot, whose reforms at Harvard helped to advance the new professionalism, was one of the earliest to notice this phenomenon. Writing in 1854, when he was twenty and apprehensive about his future, he observed: "What a tremendous question it is—what shall I be?... When a man answers that question he not only determines his sphere of usefulness in the world, he also decides in what direction his own mind shall be developed. The different professions are not different roads converging on the same end; they are different roads, which starting from the same vantage point diverge forever, for all we know."25

Intellectual specialization took on a new character in the process of becoming a system of disciplines. No longer an emphasis within a shared public culture, each new disciplinary profession developed its own conceptual basis. Each became a distinct "epistemic community."26 Disciplinary peers, not a diverse urban public, became the only legitimate evaluators of intellectual work. If the civic institution pattern of intellectual life had woven together the various threads of intellectual life, the fabric of urban public culture was riven by the end of the nineteenth century. Knowledge and competence increasingly developed out of the internal dynamics of esoteric disciplines rather than within the context of shared perceptions of public needs. This is not to say that professionalized disciplines or the modern service professions that imitated them became socially irresponsible. But their contributions to society began to flow from their own self-definitions rather than from a reciprocal engagement with general public discourse.

The process of transition from urban-based to disciplinary intellectual life was complex, and its history reveals fleeting glimpses of what seem to have been alternatives. The American Social Science Association, for example, might be interpreted as a national version of civic professionalism. Its leaders represented traditional professions, and the organization's constitution expressed a hope of bringing together men and women at "both the local and national" level to address broad social questions. Internal differentiation was based upon the definition of four areas of public concern rather than on disciplines or subdisciplines. By the end of the century, however, it was clear that the future for the social sciences belonged to professionalized disciplines associated with university departments.27

The community of scientists and intellectuals in Washington during

the Gilded Age apparently had yet another model in mind. They tried to advance a disciplinary professionalism that was national in scope within the context of a shared urban culture by federating the disciplines in a local organization that offered public lectures. But the lectures and discussions associated with the urban culture component of this organizational strategy rather quickly lost significance.28 Professional discourse was treated as a serious activity, while the manifestations of traditional urban culture were relegated to the status of mere entertainment.

The beginning of this schism can be seen as early as 1839, when Horace Mann praised the Lyceum and the public lectures typical of urban culture as "interesting and useful" while at the same time complaining that they tended toward "superficiality." He allowed that the "dim and floating notions" they offered might be acceptable for general topics, but he insisted that in areas that pertain to one's "immediate employment or profession" such knowledge would be "not simply useless, but ruinous."29 Without precisely following Mann's analysis, a number of historians have also detected serious weaknesses in midcentury urban culture.30 Such words as flatness, superficiality, sentimentalism, ineffectual, confused, lax, and simplification recur in historical writing about the period's thought. How can we explain the emergence of these intellectual problems? My argument is that a large part of the explanation can be attributed to changes in the city as a context for intellectual work. It no longer provided an effective audience.

Earlier, in the mideighteenth century, intellectual community had been available in American villages, towns, and cities. While a real distinction must be made between learned and popular traditions, the two could be bridged. Elite culture depended upon and extended popular culture. It was possible for intellectuals to speak to the pace of local thought and still address serious issues in a learned tradition that was at least dimly familiar to their local community of auditors or readers.31 Yet this intellectual community was fragile. It was vulnerable to the changes in scale, the calculation and ambition, and the cultural diversity that emerged over the course of the nineteenth century. Although a variety of formal institutions maintained this intellectual community into the nineteenth century, it began to unravel after the 1830s, particularly in the larger cities that might have assumed the role of metropolis for the United States.

Intellect's clear association with general urban elites had achieved for it a certain legitimacy and hegemony within society in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The social fragmentation, isolation, and
tute of intellectual life, townspeople discussed the leading scientific and literary publications of the day. In larger towns and cities the key institution giving form to this culture might be a local institute of arts and science; the structure of discourse might, however, be quite informal in small towns. William Dean Howells recalled that, in his father’s printing office in a small Ohio town about 1850,

there was always a good deal of talk going on. . . . When it was not mere banter, it was mostly literary; we disputed about authors among ourselves and with the village wits who dropped in. There were several of these who were readers, and they liked to stand with their back to our stove and challenge opinion concerning Holmes and Poe, Irving and Macaulay, Pope and Byron, Dickens and Shakespeare. Any author who made an effect in the East became promptly known in that small village of the Western reserve. . . . Literature was so commonly accepted as a real interest, that I do not think I was accounted altogether queer in my devotion to it.19

If Howells emphasized literary interests, other commentators, from Tocqueville, to Martineau, to Lyell, remarked upon the extent of scientific activity they found in American towns. Lyell also noticed how remarkably inclusive intellectual life was. In Cincinnati, he commented, the joining of literary and scientific men, lawyers, clergymen, physicians, “and principal merchants of the place forms a society of a superior kind.”20

While these townspeople were certainly aware of the greater accomplishments of the metropolises of the East and of Europe, they were not intimidated. In an address before a local literary society in 1814, Daniel Drake of Cincinnati observed:

Learning, philosophy and taste, are yet in early infancy, and the standards of excellence in literature and science is proportionately low. Hence, acquirements, which in older and more enlightened countries would scarcely raise an individual to mediocrity, will here place him in a commanding station. Those who attain to superiority in the community of which they are members are relatively great. Literary excellence in Paris, London, or Edinburgh is incomparably with the same thing in Philadelphia, New York, or Boston: while each of these, in turn, has a standard of merit, which may be contrasted, but cannot be compared, with that of Lexington or Cincinnati.21

To a certain extent provincial intellectual life benefited from the same difficulties of transportation and communication that stimulated manufacturing in the small towns of the trans-Appalachian West. There was enough communication with the metropolis to maintain cultural aspirations but not enough to stifle local activity through domination by metropolitan products, whether in manufacturing or in intellectual life.22 The large-scale social and economic transformations that would ultimately undermine local life were becoming apparent as early as the 1830s, but it was not until after the Civil War that Americans began to realize their implications. The consequences for civic professionalism were noted by Henry W. Bellows in 1872.

Thousands of American towns, with an independent life of their own, isolated, trusting to themselves, in need of knowing and honoring native ability and skill in local affairs—each with its first-rate man of business, its able lawyer, its skilled physician, its honored representative, its truly select-men—have been pierced to the heart by the railroad which they helped to build. . . . It has annihilated their old importance . . . removed the necessity for any first-rate professional men in the village, destroyed local business and taken out of town the enterprising young men, besides exciting the ambition of those once content with a local importance, to seek larger spheres of life.23

Bellows, I suspect, expected the establishment and ultimate hegemony of translocal structures of intellectual life and standards of competence to be accomplished through the ascendancy of an urban-based metropolitan system. In such a cultural model, which implies the legitimate concentration of elites, local organizations of intellectual life would be “federated” under metropolitan auspices. Americans, for example, might have followed the contemporary model of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, which united local, provincial societies in a national framework. American scientists were familiar with the BAAS, but when they organized the American Association for the Advancement of Science a different pattern emerged. The AAAS provided an institutional umbrella for individuals and was organized internally by developing disciplines.24

As it turned out, neither city nor metropolis shaped intellectual life. The collapse of intellectual vitality in American towns and cities coupled, perhaps, with an antiurban resentment of the metropolis opened the way for the rise of a multicentered and nonlocal system of professionalism stressing individual membership and the fragmentation of elites. That an urban-based metropolitanism failed to develop cannot, however, be blamed entirely upon provincial antipathy to the metropolis. Urban culture itself was in crisis. America’s largest cities were no longer able to organize a vital, rigorous, and coherent intellectual life.

The culture of professionalism arose as an alternative to the dis-
professionalism did not take the traditional professions as their model. They created something original. In stressing this discontinuity in the history of the professions, I make a conceptual distinction between what I call civic professionalism and disciplinary professionalism. The former pattern has a historic association with the commercial city and the Florentine tradition of civic humanism, while the latter coincides with the emergence of industrial and corporate capitalism. During the course of the nineteenth century in America, civic professionalism declined in significance and even the traditional professions of law, medicine, and the ministry began to associate themselves with the model provided by the rising disciplinary professions.

The outlines of the change can be sketched in a quick comparison of professionalism revealed in the careers of two men remembered for their contributions to the development of medical training: Samuel Bard and William H. Welch. Bard’s reputation rests on his advocacy of a hospital that could be made part of the medical instruction offered at Kings College. His campaign led to the founding of the New York Hospital in 1771, and most commentators have assumed that he thus anticipated "the modern structure of academic medicine." But a superficial similarity with the Johns Hopkins idea of a university hospital should not be allowed to obscure a profound difference between eighteenth- and twentieth-century medical professionalism. Early American professionals were essentially community oriented. Entry to the professions was usually through local elite sponsorship, and professionals won public trust within this established social context rather than through certification. While specialties were recognized, disciplinary professions did not exist. Medicine, like other professions and learned avocations, represented an emphasis within a shared and relatively accessible public culture that was nurtured by general associations of cognoscenti.

Although eighteenth-century professionals were cosmopolitan in their interests, this did not compromise their attachment to localities. They participated avidly in the transatlantic "Republic of Letters," but this union was decentralized and federalized, and not, to use the eighteenth-century political term, consolidated. The cosmopolitanism of intellectuals and professionals often took the form of city boosting. Bard, who studied in Edinburgh, wanted New York City to have the medical institutions that major European cities had. His advocacy of a hospital was linked to his work on behalf of a whole network of civic institutions. He was active in the effort to rebuild Trinity Church after it was damaged in the Revolutionary War, he was a leader in the reorganization that transformed Kings College into Columbia, and he was one of the initiators of the New York Society Library, the New York Historical Society, and the New York Society for Promoting Useful Knowledge. These efforts in civic improvement were the product of the combined energies of the educated and powerful in the city, and they integrated and gave shape to its intellectual life.

In contrast, the Johns Hopkins of Daniel Coit Gilman and Welch was a product of professional, disciplinary communities. To that extent it was an alien presence in Baltimore. It was created, President Eliot of Harvard stiffly observed, not because of any civic ambition in Baltimore, but because one man, a bachelor Quaker, willed it. The original faculty of philosophy included no Baltimoreans, and no major appointments in the medical school went to members of the local medical community. William Welch, who moved from New York to Johns Hopkins, identified with his profession in a new way: it was a branch of science—a discipline—not a civic role. Bard had been involved, as Welch was not, in a civic culture reminiscent of the traditional role of cities in directing intellectual life.

Other examples of early American civic culture come easily to mind as further illustrations. In antebellum Boston, the intellectual leadership provided by George Ticknor did not depend upon his disciplinary accomplishments or his Harvard professorship. For all of his cosmopolitan awareness and interest in the German model of academic life, Ticknor was enmeshed, socially and intellectually, in the life of the city. He wanted most to be a gentleman of Boston whose civic activities included being a Harvard professor and promoter of the public library. Hence, he took his intellectual cues from his fellow citizens, and their respect made him a preeminent and influential intellectual.

This embrace of civic culture was not merely an eastern seaboard phenomenon. One of the most striking facts of the movement of people and institutions west during the first half of the nineteenth century, at least in the North, was the replication of this civic institution pattern of urban culture in locality after locality. Because intellectual and cultural historians have been careless about specifying the setting for intellectual activity, they have failed to note the surprisingly dense networks of institutions supporting intellectual life in nineteenth-century provincial towns and cities. Even places with small populations aspired to a full intellectual life and established a full complement of urban institutions to nourish it.

Western towns organized their intellectual life on the "principle of mutual instruction." Within the context of this broadly inclusive cul-
attachment to a cluster of shared meanings and intellectual purposes. They socialize the life of the mind and give institutional force to the paradigms that guide the creative intellect.  

A consideration of the historical development of these cultures of intellectual life brings us to an insufficiently studied but vital point where intellectual history and social history touch. To discern the character of these networks of intellectual discourse, to assess their relative significance over time, and to discover their pattern of interaction promise to illuminate the social foundations of intellectual life in America.  

The public culture that intellectual historians seek to explicate and understand is the product of an exceedingly complex interaction between speakers and hearers, writers and readers. Reality is created out of this dynamic interplay. 2 “Men of knowledge,” writes Robert Merton, “do not orient themselves exclusively toward their data nor toward the total society, but to special segments of that society with their special demands, criteria of validity, of significant knowledge, of pertinent problems, etc. It is through anticipation of these demands and expectations of particular audiences, which can be effectively located in the social structure, that men of knowledge organize their own work, define their own data, seize upon problems.”  

Merton obviously has in mind the disciplinary peers so prominent in contemporary intellectual life, but his point can be applied to earlier periods, when the social organization of knowledge took different forms. Before the rise of modern professionalism, there were identifiable audiences that judged and affected the work of American thinkers. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, in fact, the city provided the primary context for the life of the mind. Since the “social frameworks of knowledge” that give shape to relationships between thinker, audience, and that which is to be explained are historically variable, they are properly the subject of sociological and historical inquiry, as is the interaction between these particular cultures of intellectual life and the larger society.  

Intellectual historians are beginning to consider the professions as a context for intellectual life, but neither they nor urban historians have so far devoted much attention to the importance of the local community as a context and audience for intellectual life. If the modern professions can be described as community without locality, it is important to recall that before 1850 locality provided an important sense of “we-ness” to intellectual life. I aim in what follows to suggest the changing significance of two fundamental and contrasting foundations of intellectual community: the city and the professions.  

Questions of legitimacy and hegemony apply to intellectual life as well as to politics. Different cultures of intellectual life may succeed each other; they may also vie for hegemony within a given society. An adequate account of the life of the mind in America requires an understanding of why and how one or another of these cultures achieves hegemony. The way in which the scientific professionals founded disciplinary associations and ensconced themselves in research universities at the end of the nineteenth century provides an example of the kind of problem that must be resolved. They succeeded in appropriating and institutionalizing science within the context of a culture of professionalism. They persuaded many of their contemporaries (and historians since) that they stood for the advent of “real” science in America. Yet they actually represented a particular kind of scientific inquiry. They were able to achieve hegemony by discrediting an alternative pattern of science based upon different assumptions about the nature of reality and rooted in civic, as opposed to disciplinary, institutions.  

Several obvious questions flow from the perspective suggested here. We must ask what failures in the older organization of intellectual life (and what new intellectual needs) prepared the way for such shifts in intellectual hegemony. How did the differing social organizations of knowledge affect or relate to the way “reality” was perceived? Did particular frameworks of knowledge, whether because of their structural characteristics or their acquired traditions, emphasize mystical over rational knowledge, positive over reflective approaches, symbolic over concrete understanding?  

How did different patterns of social relationships within particular cultures of intellectual life affect intellectual style and strategies? Felix Gilbert rightly notes that “whether a manuscript [was] circulated among a small number of people with education and interests similar to those of the writer, or whether a manuscript might be read by a great number of people unknown to the author creates necessarily a great difference in the attitude of an author.” 18 Does it make a difference that locally-based intellectual life was overwhelmingly face-to-face interchange, while in the modern professions communication is mediated by the printed word? 19 What analytical capacities were strengthened (or weakened) by a shift from one culture of intellectual life to another? How was society’s need for general explanatory ideas affected? What was the effect on the prospects for a shared public culture and for a socially responsible intelligentsia?  

Professionalism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries differed profoundly from what emerged in association with the graduate school. The scientific professionals who led the way in defining the new
The Cultures of Intellectual Life: The City and the Professions

The basic terms for the essays that follow are established here. I outline the value of attending to the spatial structuring of intellectual life and develop it into an analytical distinction between civic culture and professional culture. These terms, sometimes phrased differently, have proven enormously fruitful to my work and, if citations mean anything, to other historians as well.

This essay was first prepared as my contribution to a conference organized by John Higham and Paul Conkin to commemorate the eightieth birthday of Merle Curti. That conference, held at the Wingspread Conference Center in Wisconsin, in 1977, was devoted to the future of intellectual history. For many of the participants the future was bleak indeed, but several of us who were classified as younger historians were not prepared for such a pessimistic outlook on our future. Like some of the others of my generation at the conference, I proposed a way to proceed with an intellectual history, perhaps chastened by its confrontation with social history but enriched as well. My paper was published with this title in John Higham and Paul Conkin, eds., New Directions in American Intellectual History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 181–95.

Men and women of ideas work within a social matrix that constitutes an audience or public for them. Within this context they seek legitimacy and are supplied with the collective concepts, the vocabulary of motives, and the key questions that give shape to their work. These communities of discourse, which I am here calling cultures of intellectual life, are historically constructed and are held together by mutual at-
of their disciplines made them, so they said, uniquely able to grasp, interpret, and control this new social world. Yet, while making this positive claim, they created the university as an intellectual refuge where they could avoid the city's complexity and disorder in the construction of their discourse. To avoid misunderstanding, let me stress that I am not asserting any kind of social irresponsibility on their part. Indeed, professional service to the city as client was central to their emerging professionalism. 54 My point, however, is that they defined their relationship to the city in terms of the academic division of intellectual labor, rather than any "ordinary" definition of urban concerns inherent in a widely shared public culture. 55

The failure of midcentury cultural reformers to create a viable urban culture in New York made the United States, in the words of James Bryce, "the only great country in the world which has no capital." The absence of a capital was important, according to Bryce, because "the heaping together of the forces of rank, wealth, knowledge, intellect naturally makes such a city a sort of foundry in which opinion is melted and cast." Neither New York nor any other American city was able to assume this centering role which, in fact, creates a public culture. 56 Without this counterweight of urban culture, intellectual life in the United States took on a heavily academic and relentlessly specialized character. Serious thought in the United States, more than in England or France, is overwhelmingly concentrated within academic, disciplinary communities. 57

American social scientists achieved intellectual legitimacy and authority by creating specialized and certified communities of discourse—that is, professional disciplines. However successful this strategy proved to be in ordering discourse and securing professional status, it generated a "centrifugal tendency" in American intellectual life, producing island-communities that reduced the common universe of discourse to an exceedingly limited sphere. 58 The academic disciplines in America have been astonishingly successful in producing new knowledge, but their almost complete hegemony in our intellectual life has left Americans with an impoverished public culture and little means for critical discussion of general ideas, as opposed to scientific or scholarly expertise. 59
swirl of amateurs, popularizers, and charlatans associated with urban culture—and for valid intellectual as well as selfish personal reasons. In a disciplinary community, genuine intellectual accomplishment would find protection from the competing and often superficial demands of a heterogeneous public. Professional institutions were, as Thomas Haskell points out, “a way to insure that each audience would find its proper guide; that moral and intellectual authority would be possessed only by those who deserved it.”  

The disciplines also supplied a common method and shared problems. Hence social prestige and intellectual security were dual—and welcome—benefits conferred by the establishment of professional disciplines following upon an era when both were highly vulnerable. Yet, in this largely successful quest for order, purity, and authority, intellectuals severed intellectual life from place, specifically from its historical association with the city and thus from the public culture the city had nourished. What remained in the city lacked a center, and it lacked institutional authority.

If the social history of the city made the reform of the institutional basis of intellectual discourse essential, it also produced new perceptions of society that demanded intellectual innovation. And this new intellectual style was more easily assimilated into the disciplines than into the older civic culture.

The city’s social complexity seemed to require a more penetrating form of social analysis than amateurs displayed. Amateur social observers, even those in the ASSA, assumed that social reality was generally accessible to common observation. For them, practical acquaintance rather than theory conferred authority. For example, in the opening address of the ASSA’s New York meeting in 1874, George W. Curtis declared that Sanborn’s “practical acquaintance” with the work of social improvement “gives authority to every word that he says upon the subject [of social science].”  

The social perceptions of Sanborn and those he represented were based on a naive empiricism. Problems were typically defined in terms of particularistic and direct inquiry, using concepts shared by the general public (e.g., the reformation of criminals, divorce, better houses).

By the 1880s, however, the immensity of the material fact of urban and industrial society threatened to overwhelm intellectuals. The world around them seemed not to be known, and the customary modes of social inquiry did not seem to make it any more comprehensible. The interconnectedness of outwardly discrete social facts could not be grasped by common observation, and without such understanding the mass of social particulars was dispiriting. Professional sociology offered esoteric theory that would demonstrate these connections and force understanding out of the confusion of social facts. Valid social knowledge, formerly concretized in individual relationships or institutions, now seemed to call for definition in terms of processes and interconnections one step removed from direct human experience. The perceived need for such esoteric knowledge served, as it always has, as the basis for the creation of privileged intellectual authority.

Albion W. Small, the founder of academic sociology at Chicago, explained that the subject of the discipline was not the immediate, concrete, or commonsense evidence of social pathology that concerned amateur social inquirers, but rather “society.” The “near-infinity of group relationships and processes” that defined this sociological entity represented a new “conception of reality.” Sociology, Small declared, rejected “all the traditional ways of interpreting human experience” and offered “a new procedure toward all problems and conduct of human life.” Franklin H. Giddings of Columbia, the other major spokesman for academic sociology, agreed with Small. In an address to the ASSA in 1894, he contrasted the emerging discipline of sociology with the amateur social inquiry that went under the name of social science. He objected to the eclectic character of social science. It seemed to include everything as its subject matter and anyone as a practitioner. A much sharper definition was possible for sociology. It is not concerned with particular social facts nor with groups of them. Nor is sociology philanthropy. It is a science concerned with the “first principles” of social phenomena. “For some time past,” he declared, it has been apparent to the discerning that this unified, coherent, philosophic ‘sociology’ was destined to displace or to incorporate and co-ordinate the fragments of ‘social science.’” In place of “nebulous and vague” social science, he offered a “clear and precise” sociology.

Although Small and Giddings disagreed in some details about the precise place of sociology among the new academic disciplines, they agreed that it represented a new and esoteric order of conceptualization that distinguished it from all earlier social inquirers. It had a clear object of inquiry, a shared method, and an identifiable special audience, all of which protected academic sociologists from the chaos of thinkers and ideas in what was soon to be stigmatized as the “popular” culture of the city.

There is a wonderful irony in all of this, and we must not miss it. The social complexity and confusion of urban life was embraced by academic social scientists as their special subject. The special capacity
he called for “greater concentration of instructed opinion.” He endorsed a proposal to create an Institute in New York that would provide a center for intellectual life in the city and the nation. If, Godkin speculated, the institute, along with local “academies under it all over the country,” provided “better means of communication . . . to those interested in or engaged in the cultivation of science, arts, or literature,” it might overcome the “spirit of mob” by “infusing . . . discipline and order” into American intellectual life.40

Nothing came of this proposal for a New York Institute, but at about the same time a group of reformers and intellectuals, primarily from the Northeast, who were interested in the study and reform of social problems organized themselves into the American Social Science Association (ASSA). It aimed to organize discussion, at local and national levels, on all aspects of social life of interest to concerned citizens. Franklin B. Sanborn, the association’s guiding spirit, explained that “the double duty of all social sciences is to learn patiently what is—to promote diligently what should be.”41 The organization would, it was hoped, consolidate information about society and reform and give the authority of organization to sound opinion.

Members of the ASSA recognized that modern intellectual life required a division of labor, but the division they adopted reflected the concerns reminiscent of civic culture rather than the disciplinary divisions that would be institutionalized in the departmental structure of the modern university. They collected facts within a framework that consisted of the commonsense beliefs of informed and concerned citizens. Hence the ASSA was organized into five “departments,” each generously inclusive: Education, Health, Jurisprudence, Finance, and Social Economy. Social concern, not method or “field,” differentiated these areas of inquiry. Although academics participated in the proceedings of the association, they constituted a minority.42 And one looks in vain for the “scholarly” question as a focus of inquiry.43

The ASSA represents a bridge between civic culture and university culture. By 1900, the difference between these two models of intellectual life would be clear and unbridgeable. But for a decade after the founding of the Johns Hopkins University in 1876, the tradition of civic culture was still strong. Even Daniel Coit Gilman was concerned about the relation of the university to it. One of his first acts as president of Johns Hopkins was a gesture to civic culture: the establishment of a series of public lectures in Baltimore that would, he said, demonstrate “the methods and principles on which we rely.”44 Even more important was Gilman’s response in 1879 as president of the ASSA to Benjamin Peirce’s proposal of 1878 that the ASSA be merged with Johns Hopkins. Peirce envisioned the university giving direction to a metropolitan or nationalized intellectual enterprise that would associate the activities of academic and nonacademic social inquirers to the benefit of both.45 Gilman’s initial reaction to Peirce’s plan was favorable, though noncommittal. By 1883, however, Gilman had decided against the merger, apparently finding the civic culture tradition without real promise. (The public lectures were ended about this time.) He turned instead to a vigorous encouragement of the disciplinary associations that transformed American intellectual life. A Johns Hopkins professor organized the Modern Language Association in 1883, another the American Historical Association in 1884, and yet another the American Economic Association in 1885. Johns Hopkins professors played important roles in the founding of the American Political Science Association and the American Sociological Association in 1903 and 1905.

Peirce’s proposal evidently forced Gilman to think about the limits of traditional social inquiry and to think of the university as something that transcended this older organization of intellectual life. In a speech at Johns Hopkins in 1885, Gilman identified civilization not with the city—the usual equation—but with the university.46 A year later, in an address at Harvard, Gilman argued that “the discovery and development of unusual talent,” the task of the university, could not be accomplished through civic institutions, such as libraries, museums, and the like, nor in the “seclusion of private life.” It requires, he declared, “favorable opportunities for intercourse with other minds”—available only in the university. With Gilman we have the solution to the collapse of orderly discourse in the city. Gilman praised the university for allowing men of intellect to withdraw from the “turmoil” and “distractions of modern civilization”; the university alone allowed the “cultivation of a spirit of repose necessary for scholarship.”47

When attempts to reform the intellectual culture of the city failed, Gilman and others carved out bounded space where intellectual discourse would be safe. Academics were not unique in this respect. Boundary setting and cultural purification were major themes in the late nineteenth-century urban experience. Many groups pulled back from indiscriminate participation in urban life, seeking comfort in sharper and more exclusive cultural self-definitions.48 Just as the spatial reorganization of urban life in the 1880s and 1890s produced specialized land-use patterns and segregated residential areas, so the shared cultural space of early nineteenth-century urban intellectual life was abandoned for more specialized communities of intellectual discourse.

Emergent professionals wanted to distinguish themselves from the
If, as he thought, the United States could support only one real university, it ought to be in New York. Although it would be a national institution, he stressed that it was to be in its essential character an institution of the city. He carefully distinguished between a major institution located in the city—as the Royal Society was in London—and a civic institution that was of as well as in the city. His model for New York was Berlin, where the university stood first among a diverse cluster of distinguished cultural institutions. A city of learned societies, he declared, needs a university as its core. “Nothing in a great city can take the place of a great university.”

At a time when cultural life seemed confused and diffused, Tappan offered the university as a vehicle of reform. “A great Institution would collect together all that is now scattered and isolated among us, to be the home of scholars, the nurse of scholarlike endeavors, the regulating and harmonizing center of thought and investigation.” The university would establish the institutional foundations for a “learned class” in the city, and the “population would feel the plastic power of intellectual development and progress” through “public lectures under the direction of an elite corporation.”

The details of his plan reveal the directing and consolidating role of the university in the city’s intellectual life. Columbia, New York University, and the Free Academy (City College) would be reduced to gymnasium within an educational system capped by the university. But his vision embraced the reform of urban culture, not just the city’s formal education system. Various scientific and literary societies in the city, including the city’s theological seminaries, the newly established Astor Library, and the projected Cooper Union, would be coordinated under the aegis of the university. Thus all the city’s “Institutions of learning would grow into a harmonious whole.”

Professors would participate in civic culture, and the city’s finest nonacademic minds would be associated in various ways with the university. Professors would be “required to give popular courses to the public” in addition to their lectures in a prescribed field to “Academical Members of the University.” This wider audience of educated adults would share in the consolidated resources of the university. “The result,” Tappan wrote, “would be that the libraries, cabinets, laboratories, and lecture rooms of the University would become the resort of students of every grade; it would thus become the great centre of intellectual activity” in the city and, by extension of the city’s metropolitan role, the nation.

Tappan’s dream of reform was not a solitary one. Indeed, the leaders of the American scientific community, the so-called Lazzaroni, took up a similar plan during the 1850s. Alexander Dallas Bache, echoing a privately circulated plan developed by Benjamin Peirce of Harvard, proposed for New York City “a great University of the arts and sciences in which the practical man may meet on equal terms with the scholar.” He suggested that scholars from all over the nation be brought to New York to assume lecturerships of a five-year term at the university. Here they would be at the center of a cluster of urban institutions even more diverse than Tappan had imagined: the Chamber of Commerce was as prominent as the Astor Library in Bache’s list. With the university providing direction and clear standards of excellence, intellectual life in the city would unite “men of progress, scholars, practical men, mechanics, artists.” Civic culture and academic life would meet, even merge into one another.

While these visions of an urban university clearly anticipated in some respects the later research university, it is important to recognize the ways in which they represented an extension of the older civic culture model of intellectual life. Academic culture and civic culture remained one. The proposed university, like the earlier learned associations, had an extensive sense of its constituents. Recall: membership in the earlier learned associations was inclusive rather than exclusive. Some members were devoted entirely to research and the creation of new knowledge: they were recognizably professionals. A larger number were more routine practitioners. Finally, there was a group of members we might call “cultivators.” These were men and, rarely, women of broad culture who endeavored to keep involved in the world of learning through direct participation. One difference between Tappan’s proposed urban university and the research university that came to prevail in the United States is that this latter group has been largely excluded from academic culture. This exclusion has consequences for the life of the mind for it was cultivators who provided the link between the world of advanced scholarship, of disciplinary discourse, and the public culture of cities.

This great metropolitan university was not established, and during the 1860s cultural reformers looked to other institutional reforms. Perhaps the centralization and the standards they sought could be achieved outside the context of higher education. E. L. Godkin, a major spokesman for cultural reform from the 1860s through the final ascendency of the university, described such a plan in the pages of the Nation. Lamenting the “disintegration of opinion” in modern, urban society,
which depends on personal knowledge) to establish the trust and authority essential for the conduct of intellectual life in a milieu of strangers. A combination of self-display and sentimentalism brought Beecher the "influence" he sought. But whatever Beecher's personal success, personality was a poor substitute for the shared intellectual framework, personal knowledge, and accepted social categories that had earlier given shape to urban intellectual life. Intellectual distinctions in Beecher's New York were blurred; the structure of intellectual life in the city did not demand of Henry Ward Beecher participation in formal discourse or disciplined argument. The unhappy result, in the eyes of a contemporary, was "the union of moral philosopher and comedian."

The Beecher-Tilton adultery scandal provided E. L. Godkin with the occasion for a penetrating analysis of the crisis of urban culture and of the inadequacy of Beecher's response to it. The actions of the principals in the scandal and the reaction of the larger public, Godkin reflected, demonstrated a fuzziness of moral categories, the disarray of contemporary intellectual discourse, and a collapse of professional standards.

The problem, as Godkin saw it, was that "a large body of persons has arisen," taught by common schools, newspapers, lyceum lectures, small colleges, magazines, and the like, "who firmly believe that they have reached in the matter of social, mental, and moral culture, all that is attainable or desirable by anybody, and who, therefore, tackle all the problems of the day." The result, he declared, "is a kind of mental and moral chaos." Henry Ward Beecher's personalism reflected this problem instead of overcoming it. Godkin observed that Mr. Beecher's preaching, falling on such a mass of disorder, should not have had a more purifying effect, is due, we think, to the absence from it of anything in the smallest degree disciplinary, either in the shape of systematic theology, with its tests and standards, or of a social code, with its pains and penalties. What he has most encouraged, if we may judge by some of the fruits, is vague aspiration and lachrymose sensibility.

The discipline that Godkin missed in urban culture was precisely what Henry P. Tappan and others had proposed to supply in the 1850s through the creation of a great metropolis university in New York City. If the college had been one of many urban cultural institutions that were held together by an interlocking leadership supplied by "society," the midcentury reformers' vision of the urban university placed it at the center, with a coordinating and directing role in the city's intellectual life.

When one realizes that this early impetus for the creation of an American university originated in an urban crisis, the later emergence of the university in America fits into a broadened perspective. While it must still be said that university reformers found the colleges wanting, the source of their concern demands reinterpretation. The problem was not so much that colleges were ineffective institutions, but rather that a general and profound perception of disorder in urban culture caused intellectuals to ask something radically new of higher education. Urban culture at midcentury was defined in terms of the university and, perhaps more important, the academy was itself defined in terms of urban culture rather than as the collection of professional disciplines that it became.

There is no little irony in Tappan's ambition. The most compelling spokesman of his generation for New York City as the center for intellectual life and for the central role of a university in creating such a cultural capital, Tappan was dismissed from his professorship of moral and intellectual philosophy at the University of the City of New York (NYU), an institution that might have aspired to the role he envisioned. Even more: he is remembered in the history of higher education for making the beginnings of the modern university in a small midwestern town as president of the University of Michigan.

In University Education, published in 1851, Tappan complained of "hosts of mere expert empirics, who without learning succeed in gaining a reputation for learning and . . . invade the most sacred offices of society." A great university, he suggested, would restore the intellectual authority of those who deserve it. It would enable the public to "begin to comprehend what scholarship means" and it would demarcate advanced scholarship as the special province of "a few men of great and cultivated powers."

His proposed university was to be an urban institution. He stressed the historic association of learning with cities, particularly commercial cities, and he declared that New York had reached a stage in its historical development that demanded achievements of a higher order than bricks, banks, and water systems. Cities by their very nature produce a "wonderful influence" that encourages accomplishment in art, science, and literature. "It is," he observed, "the influence of words, of looks, of manners. . . . Men talking daily with men like a common stock of information and ideas, and keep each other's minds at work." He admitted that there is often too much excitement—"too much talking, hearing, and seeing, going about, and not enough still thought; but, nevertheless, here, more than in any other form of life, men are sharpening each other's wits."
a threat to the careful investigation and “single-minded” mode of inquiry characteristic of the scientific method.\textsuperscript{19} We all know, of course, that Eliot found a solution to this problem in the elective system and in a graduate school based upon professional disciplines. But this solution was not so much a reform of urban culture as a withdrawal from it. Before the creation of the graduate school, there were important attempts to reform the intellectual life of cities.\textsuperscript{20}

The problems faced by urban intellectuals were fairly clear. How does one achieve intellectual authority in a society of strangers? How does one locate an intellectual community with shared purposes, standards, and rules of discourse in the heterogeneity of the midcentury city? Could the diverse and anonymous audience presented by great cities constitute a viable community of discourse?

I have identified three distinct responses to this crisis of the city and of intellectual life. None of them, as it turned out, determined the shape of modern intellectual life, but all are interesting and revealing. One of them is exemplified in the career of Henry Ward Beecher. Another found its clearest expression in the proposals of Henry P. Tappan and others for the creation of an urban university in the American metropolis, and the third is symbolized by the American Social Science Association.

In retrospect, Henry Ward Beecher may not seem to qualify as an intellectual, but in the New York of the 1870s he stood for the life of the mind.\textsuperscript{21} Beecher accepted, even embraced, the new conditions or urban intellectual life. He acknowledged that the diverse urban audience the city had thrown up to the intellectuals might pose difficulties, but it was, he explained, the “atmosphere in which all high scientific truth and research, and all learning, in its ampest extent, are...to find their nourishment and stimulation.” These new circumstances implied, however, that preachers and other intellectuals would have to “develop new resources” to “maintain [the] authority and influence” once vouchsafed them by tradition and social connection.\textsuperscript{22}

In the Yale lectures on preaching, which he delivered between 1872 and 1875, Beecher outlined his strategy for intellectual influence. The central problem he confronted was that of addressing a heterogeneous and anonymous urban audience. He recognized that it was possible to create specialized audiences in the city, but he rejected an intellectual life that was confined in “a single groove.” The task of modern intellectual life, Beecher believed, was to speak “to the whole people.”\textsuperscript{23}

He offered the new science of phrenology as an aid in this effort. With knowledge of its principles, a public speaker could by visual in-spection immediately learn the character of the anonymous individuals in the audience. “You must know what men are, in order to reach them,” and with phrenology, Beecher explained, this can be achieved. “It has been the foundation on which I have worked.”\textsuperscript{24}

It was Beecher’s notion of personalism, however, that was his most important contribution to the quest for intellectual authority and influence in the city. Beecher told his students at Yale that all depended on one’s success “in opening the hearts of your hearers.” With Beecher, formal discourse dissolved into a personalism that relied upon personality and the appearance of intimate disclosure. His sermons and lectures were “familiar conversations”; sympathy, not shared intellectual purposes or traditions, would provide a common ground for the urban audience. “I aim to make them feel my personality.”\textsuperscript{25}

Beecher’s approach to the problem of modern intellectual life is revealed in his discussion of the proper architecture for churches and lecture halls. Traditional church architecture, a legacy of formality and ceremony, established a wide gulf between the preacher and the congregation. When the preacher as an individual was less important than traditional ritual, this was appropriate. But in modern times, Beecher explained, the “church is a household, and...a preacher has a personal influence on men.” The architecture of the church must bring the preacher “face to face with other men” and nourish the informal influence characteristic of street-corner discussions. The minister must be physically near the audience, and the congregation must be able to see the whole body of the preacher—not just the head and chest—so that they might feel his full “magnetic influence.” When Plymouth Church in Brooklyn was built for him, Beecher told the architect, “I want them [the congregation] to surround me, so that they will come up on every side, and behind me, so that I shall be in the center of the crowd, and have the people surge all about me.” The completed church was, in Beecher’s words, “perfect, because it was built on a principle,—the principle of social and personal magnetism, which emanates reciprocally from a speaker and from a close throng of hearers.”\textsuperscript{26}

Beecher must be credited with confronting the crisis of urban culture: he recognized and adapted himself to the social scale and diversity, isolation, anonymity, and egalitarianism that eroded customary sources of intellectual authority in New York. With traditional rituals of intellectual accreditation and of formal discourse abandoned, producers and consumers of intellectual work found it increasingly difficult to fix on the cues that made a coherent and rigorous intellectual culture possible. Beecher grasped the possibility of relying on personality (not character,
foundations of this traditional pattern of civic culture were being dissolved by social change, and this produced a profound cultural crisis.

Population figures reveal the magnitude of urban change. The population of the nation’s largest cities soared between the first census in 1790 and the seventh in 1860. New York represented the most dramatic case. Manhattan, the home of 33,131 in 1790, had a population of 813,669 in 1860. Including Brooklyn, New York’s population already exceeded one million. Philadelphia grew from 42,520 to 565,529. For Boston the numbers are smaller, but the growth from 18,038 to 177,840 transformed the culture of that city.¹⁰

The result was urban chaos. The impress of numbers, coupled with the development of unprecedented cultural diversity and an egalitarian ethos, obliterated the social connections that had woven together the public culture of the colonial city and that had nourished an acknowledged learned society with shared purposes, traditions, and rules of discourse. By 1900 the city was reintegrated on new principles. A new vision of urban order found expression in spatial specialization, social segmentation, and bureaucratization. The eighteenth-century city of inclusive diversity was replaced by the twentieth-century city of “closed social cells.” A sense of order was maintained by minimizing contact and keeping it within specialized institutional channels.¹¹ The reordering of intellectual life—the creation of academic disciplines or intellectual cells—proceeded in a parallel pattern and from the same perception of urban disorder.

The middle years of the century, however, were years of confusion and frustration. Between about 1840 and 1875 the old pattern had collapsed and the new had not yet been perceived. Intellectuals looked about for viable institutional means of achieving social order and for a way of restoring order and authority in intellectual life.¹²

The connection between unprecedented urban growth and the difficulties of midcentury intellectual life has eluded historians but not those intellectuals who lived through it. In an essay titled “The Intellectual Life of America,” published in the New Princeton Review, Charles Eliot Norton began by contrasting the Boston of Emerson’s youth with Boston of the Gilded Age. Earlier, he emphasized, “the community was more homogeneous and its members were acquainted . . . . There were more common and controlling traditions and associations.” Emerson’s thought and convictions had been nourished in this context. Now, however, men of intellect found little to sustain them in the city. They must “adapt themselves to a comparatively low plane of intellectual life.” The urban and democratic transformations of a half century had blurred intellectual distinctions and eroded the authority of the social institutions that had supported them. “The principle of equality,” Norton complained, “is extended into regions where it has no proper validity. Our public life, our literature, our journals, our churches, our amusements, our politics, all exhibit a condescension to the crowd . . . . There is a lack of independence and of leading; a lack of superior excellence in nobler fields of effort and expression.”¹³

There was in the midcentury city no coherent and demanding institutional structure for intellectual culture. Instead of a clearly signified—and often personally known—community of discourse that established intellectual authority, the urban intellectual, now standing essentially alone, faced a heterogeneous, anonymous, and vastly expanded audience.¹⁴ The city had once ordered relations between writer and reader, speaker and hearer. It no longer did so.

The traditional connection of “society” and intellect was severed. Society retreated into the tight and mannered world of sociability that Edith Wharton would later describe.¹⁵ Where there earlier had been established mechanisms of recruitment into the professions and learned society through family connection and elite sponsorship, the Age of Barnum witnessed an intellectual free-for-all, as all manner of men sought an audience in the city’s public culture. “The mind of each,” Tocqueville noticed as early as 1830, “is . . . unattached to that of his fellows by tradition or common habits.”¹⁶ Traditional signs and institutions of trust and authority in intellectual and other matters were devalued, a fact which provided material for Herman Melville’s Confidence Man (1857).¹⁷

Urban institutions, with their conversation and lectures, that had once been the medium of a vital intellectual life came under criticism for their “superficiality.” Horace Mann, for example, complained in 1839 that the Lyceum and public lectures characteristic of urban culture offered “dim and floating notions” that might be acceptable for general topics but which in areas pertaining to one’s “immediate employment or profession” were “not simply useless, but ruinous.”¹⁸

During the next quarter century the issue became more pressing and the relation between specialized knowledge and an interest in general cultivation of knowledge more problematic. In 1867, two years before he became President Eliot of Harvard, Charles W. Eliot observed that intellectuals faced great difficulty in finding their public in a way “consistent with self-respect, independence, and mental uprightness.” The public culture of midcentury cities, because it was so lacking in rigor and was so receptive to “loose and inaccurate statements,” posed
in these terms, but they apply, I am convinced, to earlier periods when the social organization of knowledge took different forms. Before the rise of modern professionalism there were identifiable audiences that judged and affected the work of American thinkers. The city and the cultural institutions it nourished once aspired to and often accomplished this task.

In early modern Europe and even into the early nineteenth century, the learned world—by then no longer sustained by the church—was identified with “Society,” either at the court or in cities, rather than with colleges and universities. It was a world created by a leisured aristocracy, an aspiring bourgeoisie, and elite members of the professions. Paris represented the model, and Goethe’s praise for its service to artists and writers is both famous and succinct. “Conceive a city like Paris,” he told Eckermann in 1827, “where the highest talents of a great kingdom are all assembled in a single spot, and by daily intercourse, strife, and emulation, mutually instruct and advance each other; where the best works, both of nature and art, from all the kinds of the earth, are open to daily inspection.” Stated differently, Paris offered mutual criticism, recognition for talent, models and standards, museums and libraries.

In the American republic, of course, there was no court. Nor did America’s provincial cities absorb all serious intellectual discourse. But with the partial exception of the denominational community of discourse associated largely with Princeton Presbyterians, aspirations and to a large degree reality placed intellectual life in the nation’s cities. A dense network of personal associations and urban cultural institutions made the nourishment of intellectual life a dimension of the urban experience.

The learned world of Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, as well as of such lesser cities as Albany or Cincinnati, was an association of gentlemen. The conjunction of learning with wealth and power was easily recognized within the city, and this gave authority to the city’s learned circle. This pattern was sustained by the sociology of the city. As Sam Bass Warner demonstrated in the case of Benjamin Franklin’s Philadelphia, the city was characterized by an inclusive diversity. Physical closeness and personal interaction characterized the city, but this did not imply the disorganization of urban roles. Nor did diversity and personal association imply equality. A clear sense of social place and obligation was impressed through personal relations. Precisely because established social categories and cues signifying them were so clear, learned discourse had its own well-understood order.

The advancement of learning in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American cities was a civic role, and the substantive meaning of this culture was improvement, personal and social. The educated and powerful worked to establish a cluster of urban institutions that nourished cultural life: libraries and philosophical societies, mechanics and agricultural associations, historical societies, colleges, and small, informal discussion groups devoted to mutual education. Culture and learning had a distinctive and from our perspective notably preindustrial quality. Instead of the language of scholarly productivity and the creation of knowledge, phrases so common in the age of the university, we find in earlier diaries and correspondence such key words as cultivation, pleasure, and improvement.

Intellectual life was rooted in a mix of urban cultural institutions. Only later would one of these institutions, the college converted into the university, achieve hegemony in intellectual life and transform the urban-based world of learning into university scholarship.

Benjamin Franklin best represents the activist, pragmatic, and institution-founding character of early American civic humanism. His autobiography has made everyone familiar with the range of his interests and with his good works as a bourgeois citizen of Philadelphia: the Junto, the Library Company, the American Philosophical Society, the University of Pennsylvania. Only in his genius, however, was Franklin unique. Compare, for example, the less well-known Samuel Bard of New York. Bard was the son of John Bard, a physician who had, in fact, been associated as a young man with Franklin’s Junto and who had organized in New York a “Weekly Society of Gentlemen” in 1750. The younger Bard, Samuel, also a prominent physician, assumed a leading role in the creation of a series of civic institutions that advanced learning in New York. He founded the New York Hospital as a teaching hospital in 1771, and he was a leader in the transformation of Kings College into Columbia. He was also importantly involved in the development of the New York Library Society, the New York Historical Society, and the New York Society for Promoting Useful Knowledge. One could mention others in New York, equally obscure today, equally central to the advancement of culture in the early republic: William Dunlap, Samuel L. Mitchill, John W. Francis.

The civic institution model of intellectual life continued into the nineteenth century. But it was neither firmly rooted in provincial America nor productive of the brilliance to be found in European capitals or even such provincial cities as Edinburgh. Its weakness and fragility made it vulnerable in the face of rapid urban expansion and the democratic ideology nourished in the age of Jackson. By midcentury, the social
The Erosion of Public Culture: Cities, Discourses, and Professional Disciplines

If the previous essay traced a narrow thread of my theme, this one broadens the canvas. It is the broadest conception of the issues. It is also important for a modification of the essentially two-stage model of the framing offered in chapter 1. Here I identify an intermediate culture of American higher learning. Like Louise Stevenson in her book Scholarly Means to Evangelical Ends: The New Haven Scholars and the Transformation of Higher Learning in America, 1830-1890 (1986), a book published after this essay originally appeared, my aim was to establish an intermediate organization of intellectual life as distinct, not merely transitional. I make a great deal of a social crisis that I define in urban terms. While holding to that centrality, I would now allow other developments to share more fully in my account: geographical expansion, religious transformation (evangelicalism), market capitalism, and the radical expansion of suffrage (white men).

Because of the work of Leonore O’Boyle (“Learning for Its Own Sake: The German University as Nineteenth Century Model,” Comparative Studies in Society and History [1983]) and Charles McClelland, especially his essay on Berlin in a book I edited, The University and the City: From Medieval Origins to the Present (1988), I now understand that Americans seriously misunderstood the case of Berlin and the German university. Were I to undertake this study today, one of the questions that would loom large is the reason for this misperception or misrepresentation of the University of Berlin by American metropolitan cultural reformers. Since I wrote this essay, Mary Kupiec Cayton has published important work on audience reception of midnineteenth century urban cultural production, and that perspective would very much enrich this essay. (See her “The Making of an American Prophet: Emerson, His Audiences, and the Rise of the

**The Institutional Structure of Intellectual Life Was Radically Transformed in the United States between the Civil War and World War I.** The product of these changes was a system of professionalized, academic scholarship that brought a very high proportion of learned discourse under the aegis of the university and gave power to a wide range of professions on the basis of authority conferred by a university connection. A number of fine historical studies of the “revolution in higher education” and of professionalization of science and scholarship have made the outlines of this story reasonably familiar. With this essay, however, I propose to place this innovation in the context of a wider social and cultural problem. I want to direct attention to the subtle but vital relationship between a crisis in urban culture and these changes in the social organization and authority of knowledge, particularly in reference to serious social inquiry and commentary, what we now call the social sciences.

The events that precipitated the academic revolution are not to be found exclusively within the history of higher education or even of the professions. My argument is that a perceived failure of urban culture and a sense that the city presented a new kind of intellectual problem decisively shaped the professionalization of discourse about society in the United States. Placing developments in this context illuminates the relationship of knowledge in professional disciplines to the general culture and reveals in a somewhat novel way the intellectual and moral problems inherent in our contemporary configuration of intellectual life.

My approach to this topic has been guided by assumptions that should be stated at the outset. I believe that a coherent structure of discourse is an essential foundation for a satisfactory intellectual culture. Intellectual work I think takes place within an institutional matrix that confers authority and concentrates attention on selected ways of perceiving and interpreting experience. Communities of discourse supply collective concepts, mechanisms for exclusion and appropriation, and give institutional force to the paradigms that guide the creative intellect.

We ordinarily think of universities and the professional disciplines
Intellect and Public Life

Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States

Thomas Bender

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